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Louisbourg



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The

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of the fall of

LOUISBOURG



Two hundred summers ago the French stronghold of Louisbourg fell to a British naval and military force. July 27, 1758 — the day on which British infantry occupied the battered fortress — is remembered as the date on which Great Britain assumed unchallenged military ascendancy over the Atlantic Coast of Canada and France's control of her North American colonies fell into a rapid decline. Louisbourg's capture foreshadowed the capture of Quebec a year later and the final transfer of Canada to Great Britain.

Louisbourg was built in the years following the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession and left France in the Gulf of St. Lawrence with only the islands of Ile Royale (Cape Breton), Isle St. Jean (Prince Edward Island) and other small islands. The site of the fortress was a fine fishing harbour frequented so regularly by English fishermen that it had become known as English Harbour. English Harbour met the requirements of the French who were seeking a position on Cape Breton that they could strongly fortify to protect their lines of communication through the Gulf and the River of St. Lawrence and, at the same time, a harbour for fishermen and for the cargo ships that plied in commerce between France and her colonies in Canada and the West Indies.

In 1713 the settlement of Louisbourg — named after King Louis XIV — was founded. The fortifications begun in 1717, were designed by French military engineers and built by contractors, using French soldiers as labourers. The cost was tremendous; at first, stone and brick were brought from France and no effort was spared to make Louisbourg a fitting symbol of French prestige; the equivalent of \$10,000,000 is said to have been spent on the construction.

Louisbourg was a complete town occupying an area of 57 acres behind ramparts that were about 35 feet thick. The main buildings were the 280-foot-long hospital, and Chateau St. Louis or Citadel Building, a structure 360 feet long containing the Governor's and officers' quarters, the chapel and the barracks. In the town were a coal yard, fish market, a prison, shops, and homes. On the cliffs overlooking the harbour entrance was a magnificent lighthouse.

In 1745, during the War of the Austrian Succession, Louisbourg was attacked by a force of 4,000 New England volunteers and a British fleet. After a siege of 46 days, during which the determination and energy of the attackers was progressively weakened by the brave and stubborn resistance of the defenders, the stronghold surrendered conditionally. Louisbourg was occupied by New England troops during the winter — a winter of disease and discontent for the militiamen who, their task accomplished, wished to return to their homes and civilian occupations — and then turned over in May, 1746, to British regiments sent from Gibraltar.

In 1748, Louisbourg was returned to France by terms of the treaty ending the war and the next year the French re-occupied the fortress. Although legally at peace, France and Great Britain continued their armed hostility toward each other in North America and some effort was made to repair the fortifications and strengthen the garrison of Louisbourg.

However, through neglect and the lack of materials and money, Louisbourg was not capable of putting up a strong and sustained defence at the time the Seven Years' War began in 1756.

Against the British force which sailed from Halifax in the spring of 1758 to take Louisbourg was pitted a French garrison of 3,300 regulars and some additional militia troops and Indians, and a supporting squadron of five French men-of-war, each mounting either 74 or 64 guns, which had slipped through the British blockade. The British force was formidable, as befitted a force assigned to fulfil a primary objective of strategy: 14,000 troops commanded by such outstanding leaders as Major-General Jeffrey Amherst and Brigadier-General James Wolfe, and 108 ships, 39 of which were warships.

Under the cover of diversionsary landings at other points, Wolfe led the main landing party ashore at Freshwater Cove in the face of heavy French artillery and musket fire and established a beach-head on June 8. Four days later, his force moved under cover of fog around the harbour and took possession of the undefended French artillery position near the Lighthouse. From this position, and other artillery positions around the harbour, the British shelled the town and the French men-of-war. By July 22, 12 batteries were firing on Louisbourg, which was running short of ammunition. Three days later, the principal French warships were out of action — either sunk, burned while aground, or captured and towed away. Although there were only three guns still capable of returning the British fire and the fortifications had been reduced to crumbled masonry, the French garrison were still willing to fight on and meet a British assault from improvised positions within the city. However, the Governor of Louisbourg, moved by the sufferings of the civilian population surrendered the fortress on July 26.

From July 27, 1758 to October, 1760, Louisbourg was occupied by the British. They made no attempt to re-build the fortifications except for building wooden bastions against the threat of Indian attacks. The British policy on the future of Louisbourg was decided in 1760. Since the British needed no fortifications on Cape Breton Island, the fortress of Louisbourg and its harbour defence were to be destroyed completely making the site useless to the French if they ever regained Cape Breton Island.

The demolition work was carried out thoroughly and with great skill. Forty seven galleries were tunneled into the walls and 345 chambers loaded with powder. In 18 successive explosions during 1760 the fortress of Louisbourg disappeared, much of the cut stone being taken to Halifax for the construction of important buildings.

Since 1928, Louisbourg and the battle-grounds outside its former walls have been a National Historic Site. Only the traces of foundations, piles of rubble and the outlines of streets remain, but in the museum building there is an excellent model of Louisbourg showing in accurate detail all physical aspects of the fortress. Several hundred relics of Louisbourg and the men and events related to it are exhibited in the museum. In 1940, Louisbourg was designated a National Historic Park.

